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SUBJECT: AFGHANISTAN'S ELECTIONS: THE VIEW FROM PANJSHIR

Classified By: Interagency Provincial Affairs Deputy Coordinator Hoyt Y
ee for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: As Election Day nears, accusations of foul play abound in Panjshir Province, although none of the issues raised have found their way to the Elections Complaint Commission (ECC). In a meeting with Panjshir PRT Director on August 12, Panjshir Governor Haji Mohamad Bahlol, an Abdullah supporter, decried Karzai's government as corrupt and ineffective. He urged the USG not to remain neutral, but to side with Abdullah or another "Tajik or Pashtun" who will work for the good of the country. Bahlol requested that PRT Director convey this message to senior USG officials. PRT Director agreed, while reaffirming the USG neither supports nor opposes any candidate. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) In Panjshir Province, it is all politics, all the time. President Karzai's choice of former Mujahed commander Marshall Fahim as his running mate is testing local loyalties here in Panjshir. In the areas around the provincial capital of Bazarak, support for Dr. Abdullah is strong and visible, with campaign posters prominently displayed. But in the upper districts of Khenj, Dara and Pariyon, there is considerable sympathy for Fahim. Whether that support will translate into votes for the unpopular Karzai is unclear. Fahim's influence probably far exceeds that of fellow Panjshiri Ahmad Zia Masood, who was on the ticket in 2004 when Karzai polled a miserable one percent in Panjshir. With the bar set so low, Fahim's help in this election may well lead to a ten-fold increase in votes for Karzai in Panjshir.

¶3. (C) Governor Bahlol has alleged to us on several occasions that Karzai and Fahim are fixing the vote in Panjshir, including through a \$60,000 payment to Panjshir's Provincial Election Officer (Comment: UNAMA reps hold the PEO in high regard, and he is also working well with the PRT. End comment). Other sources tell us that Fahim has bought the support of former Mujahadeen commanders in the province. While the Governor has appealed to the PRT to ensure a fair vote in Panjshir, his own hands may not be entirely clean. Bahlol has reportedly deployed men to Karzai's campaign offices to monitor and intimidate those who enter. We heard that the Governor himself traveled to remote Pariyon to impede local attendance at a Fahim event. One rumor circulating is that the July 12 "bombing" of Karzai's campaign office near Bazarak, which caused barely perceptible damage, was a hoax perpetrated by Fahim supporters to implicate Bahlol. None of these issues have found their way to the ECC.

¶4. (SBU) While Panjshir is awash in political games, the likelihood of violence seems small. Governor Bahlol appears to have made peace with General Mullah Saboor, a Fahim ally who was suddenly installed as Panjshir's top cop last month in what appears to have been a political move. Neither the IEC nor the District Governors across Panjshir's seven provinces are expecting any serious problems on election day. There are reports, however, that Fahim is planning to hold an election rally in Panjshir before August 20, with numerous participants arriving from Kabul) an event that has the

potential to spark confrontation with Abdullah supporters. Still, most Panjshiris appear to be taking the competition in stride, noting pragmatically that with Fahim on the ticket, an Abdullah loss would still provide for Panjshiri power in Kabul. An estimated 2,000) 3,000 Panjshiris attended Abdullah's rally on July 28 in Bazarak, where the atmosphere was peaceful and relaxed.

¶15. (SBU) Some of these dynamics are evident in the run-up to the Provincial Council elections, where 52 candidates are vying for nine seats. The competition is lively, and most Panjshiris appear eager to vote. Many candidates are reportedly tied to either Abdullah or Fahim. Seven women, most of whom are well-educated, are competing for three guaranteed seats. Candidates include a number of professionals, including teachers and medical doctors.

However, a significant minority are former commanders with few qualifications beyond their Mujahadeen credentials. We hear that many Panjshiris are frustrated with the performance of current PC members, who delivered much less than they promised. Anti-incumbent fever will likely lead to new faces in the Council.

¶16. (C) Panjshir PRT Director met with Governor Bahlol on August 12 to discuss the presidential and provincial council elections. As always, Bahlol openly acknowledged his support for Dr. Abdullah in the election. He noted quietly that he had just met with fellow Abdullah supporter Balkh Governor Atta to discuss next steps in the campaign. Bahlol said Karzai's government is corrupt and ineffective. His ministers keep their families outside of Afghanistan and their money in foreign banks. The United States, said Bahlol, created Karzai. Moreover, by supporting Karzai's extension beyond the end of his term, the USG allowed Fahim

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to jump into the race. Bahlol argued that the USG cannot afford to stay neutral in this election. It should side with Abdullah, or with another "Tajik or Pashtun" who is clean and will work for the good of the country. Governor Bahlol requested that PRT Director convey these messages to the Ambassador, Secretary Clinton, and Senator John Kerry. PRT Director agreed to inform Washington, while reaffirming that the USG neither supports nor opposes any candidate in the elections.

¶17. (C) Comment: For Panjshir, the most significant implication of the national election may be its impact on Governor Bahlol. As one of the few Governors still overtly supporting Abdullah, he is clearly out on a political limb. Bahlol has told us several times that he expects his tenure as Governor to end soon after the election) either propelled by an Abdullah victory into a Kabul ministry or shown the door by a victorious Karzai. For us, his disappearance from the political scene would be a loss. PRT Panjshir has known no Governor but Bahlol. He has been a strong supporter of our mission since the PRT was established in 2005. However, in light of the strong and broad support the PRT enjoys in Panjshir, we do not anticipate any serious disruptions should a new Governor emerge on the scene. End Comment.

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